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AUTHOR Spinner, Bettye T.
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ABSTRACT

Intended to provide teachers of poetry with both inspiration and teaching advice, this paper explains how one teacher developed a method for teaching poetry successfully in high school. The first part of the paper consists of an autobiographical fragment describing how the teacher used free time to begin seriously writing poetry, as well as how the poetry writing inspired her to read poetry more and learn more about it. This autobiographical section also describes how the teacher took this zeal into her classroom to the point where she inspired an all-male remedial class to take pride in their own poems. The second section of the paper deals with the literary theory underlying the teacher's pedagogical approach, which is derived from psychology and from Adrienne Rich's views of writing as re-vision. The methodology presented stresses a "hands on" approach to poetry. The paper's third section presents the rhetorical theory that underlies the approach advocated in the paper, which contends that the act of writing impinges directly upon learning. A list of the 17 references for the preceding text is next, followed by appendixes on the following topics: (1) poetry workshop guidelines; (2) instructions for student samples of formula poetry, metaphorical poetry, paradox poetry, poetry from photographs, and poetry based on the Classics; and (3) a list of seven useful references for poetry teachers. (SKC)

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RE-VISION: THE STUDENT AS POET

Bettye T. Spinner

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An Autobiographical Fragment

Believing, as Paul Valery suggests, that all theory is a fragment of autobiography, I have examined my experiences to pinpoint the origin of my theory of teaching poetry to high school students by having them write it. Originally, I thought the seminal influence to be my reading of "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision," an essay in which Adrienne Rich voices her manifesto of woman's need for an imaginative transformation of reality. However, I later realized that what I had found in Rich was the explicit expression of constructs that had been evident in my teaching at least two years before I read her work. Although she provided a name for my tacit understandings, my search for a Valerian autobiographical "fragment" could not accurately center in my exposure to Rich.

I know now that the significant fragment is lodged in an occurrence five years ago when I was assigned a student teacher. It was then that I underwent a transition John Dewey would have termed "an experience." Left with abundant unstructured time, I decided to concentrate on an activity I had experimented with occasionally in college and even as an adult but had subsequently discarded, just as I had discarded painting and playing the piano. I appropriated one of the composition books our English department uses for student journals, found a comfortable chair in an isolated corner of

the faculty work room, and for six weeks indulged in an experience which transformed my life and my teaching: I began seriously to write poetry.

I discovered the excitement of exploring my version of the world, the challenge of trying to articulate my discoveries, and the pleasure of having colleagues acclaim that articulation to be a unique perception of common experience when on occasion they read my work. Because their comments were more admiring than salutary, however, I felt the need, in this newfound sense of myself, to extend my audience to include critical others. I joined a workshop, attended a summer writing conference (Artist/Teacher Institute at Stockton State College), began submitting poems for publication, and became a poet.

The point, however, is not that my empty school hours were again filled with meaning but that once I began to write, I did not want to stop writing. When the first journal was finished, I started another. I wrote at home and shared my poems with my family. Also I developed an insatiable urge to read poetry, to attend readings, to follow the paths verse had taken since Sandburg and Frost, who, for me, were the representatives of contemporary poetry. Loving poetry, I was shocked at how little I knew, and worse, at how little poetry I had felt inclined to teach in twenty years in the classroom. I

learned, however, that many of my colleagues had taught even less! And that some of them, dreading the mode, had taught none except the mandatory Shakespearean play.

The following school year began with my determination to include poetry writing in all of my classes, even in my remedial senior English class composed of eight boys who considered themselves to be inveterate haters of poetry. To them the form was not only useless but irredeemably effeminate. Ultimately these young men became proud publishers of a book of "sense imagery" poems, using a pattern of the five senses to describe impressions of such appropriately masculine subjects as hockey, football, a pizza party, and skeet shooting.

(Appendix B) Most poets, like Michael, omitted an active speaker, simply listing images to evoke the scene and mood. Wayne's poem, "Deer Hunting," most obviously followed the formula.

The superintendent's congratulatory letter to the class, undoubtedly a highlight of their school careers, was greeted with delighted, self-conscious comments: "That wasn't even my best work." "If I'd known you were going to send him a copy of the book, I would have written a really good poem." "We'll blow him away with our next book!"

I have chosen to discuss reactions of my remedial

class in order to emphasize the pride, the sense of possibility that discovery and acknowledgement of their creativity brought to them. Youngsters in regular and honors classes were no less proud, just more accustomed to praise and consequently, perhaps, less transformed by the recognition and esteem their work received from classmates, friends, and families. Yet poetry began to emerge for them as texts they could write, readings they could understand and enjoy, literature written by people who were no stranger than they, and who, like them, searched for the "right" words to make experiences and ideas come alive for other people. They confirmed James Moffett's belief that

when children write, they read more, they become involved in language, they get caught up in the cycles of giving and taking words that gather momentum and accelerate progress in both reading and writing (Moffett, 1968).

My students' experiences corroborated my own. They came to know the same pleasures I had personally found in writing and in sharing that writing with a community of others. Out of our mutual experience this theory of the teaching of poetry evolved. Practically applied in a more systematic manner during the last two years, this theory has led to the establishment of "Creative Friday," in my English classes. A weekly writing workshop happily anticipated by my students, Creative Friday provides time for students to write and to have that work (primarily, but not exclusively, poetry) critiqued in

small groups. The appendixes to this article are part of a hand-out which I distributed during a presentation of this theory at the N.C.T.E. convention in San Antonio last November. They describe the workshop design and illustrate the mini-lessons as well as the student poetry which emerged from them.

The Theory

Certainly no student enters a high school English class as a *tabula rasa*. By their freshman year students have formulated definite hypotheses regarding the extent to which they will respond cognitively and affectively to the content of an English course. My experience has been that by the time they become seniors, their expectations, predicated on eleven years in language arts classes, are often so negative and so entrenched against the study of poetry that initial mention of it evokes open dismay or vocal discontent among even the most academically proficient students. Discounting Homer and Shakespeare as poets, many students recall having "done" no poetry since they were back in junior high or elementary school. Their verbal memories are rife with references to confusion and ambiguity, to a sense of collusive deception between poet and teacher since only she is able to understand his meaning. Thus, if during their schooling students are not disabused of that perception, they graduate and join the adult masses who ravenously consume novels but reject poetry and poets as irrelevant, or at best peripheral, in their lives.

As educators who are aware of the value of language as a means of knowing, we should, in my opinion, consider this situation disallowable. Carl Jung posits that poetry

penetrates

to that matrix of life in which all men are embedded, which imparts a common rhythm to all human existence, and allows the individual to communicate his feelings and his strivings to mankind (Jung, 172).

Similarly significant, in his theories of the existence of multiple intelligences, psychologist Howard Gardner includes linguistic intelligence as one which requires considerable command if one hopes "to proceed with any efficacy in the world." The poet, in Gardner's estimation, is the exemplar of language competence, one who best employs the rhetorical, mnemonic, explanatory, and metalinguistic aspects that are core operations of language in society (Gardner, 77-78).

Subscribing to this singular importance of poetic discourse, I consider it too viable an avenue of growth of mind to be denied students.

The question at issue, then, is how to remove the psychological barriers that exist between students and the poetic mode so that meaningful engagement may ensue. In the context in which Adrienne Rich speaks of writing as re-vision, she is admonishing women to pursue a transcendent imagination. She urges the beginning of a quest which requires women writers to find the freedom to "enter the currents of your thought like a glider pilot...to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at that moment" (Rich, 43). Her exhortation to the

woman poet is to assume an active stance of re-naming which defies a conservative holding back and allows, as a result, the woman to actualize the transforming power within her.

Rich's invitation appears to me to be one immediately transferrable from the woman writer to the reticent, passive student in the English classroom. Might that student not achieve awareness of the transcendent imagination manifested by the poet if, indeed, the student becomes one? The potential for metamorphic understanding of poetic discourse and appreciation of its users exists in the student's acting on his freedom to re-view or to re-name himself and his world. The assertion of freedom inherent in this new construal of himself empowers his writing and facilitates his penetration of the barrier which separates him from the poem and the poet. Carl Jung affirms the potential comprehension that we may realize when we assume the persona of the poet,

...when we are able to let the work of art act upon us as it acted upon the artist. To grasp its meaning, we must allow it to shape us as it once shaped him. Then we understand the nature of his experience. We see that he has drawn upon the healing and redeeming forces of the collective psyche that underlies consciousness (Jung, 172).

Moffett contends that the student who writes in the forms of the authors he reads achieves a unique interior awareness of literature (Moffett, 208). Students who create

their own texts foster internalizations which transcend the immediate writing experience. These constructs may last a lifetime, engendering personal identification with other poets, with their processes of text generation, and with poetry as literature.

This participatory, "hands-on" relationship between writer and text enhances the study of all discourses but is particularly relevant to the study of poetry. Inevitably, as students manipulate the syntax of poetry, they grow to recognize the intricate possibilities of language. The rewards, however, are not limited to the linguistic. Although he equates the poet's mastery of language with the artist's mastery of his palette, poet Stephen Spender in "The Making of a Poem" (Ghiselin, 113) describes the creative process of his craft as having a catalog of sensitizing effects upon "ear, vision, imagination and memory." Through such fresh combinations of words as the poet makes, "we have our only way of creating new worlds" (Gardner, 77).

If indeed language is both product and producer of cognition, successful or even unsuccessful efforts at articulation become for students inroads into their understanding of the world and of themselves. Self awareness and actualization are the end products of this constantly expanding analysis/expression dialectic. The spiraling

insights and capacities garnered through writing mirror the spiraling self which the writer fashions by his actions. Citing from the work of C. T. P. Diamond, Parker and Goodkin use the term, "self fashioning being" to describe the teacher who inquires, analyzes, and theorizes (Parker and Goodkin, 28). The term easily describes the student poet as he, too, focuses upon his process as he writes.

I anticipate that my own later research will prove (if others' study has not already done so) that the pattern of student engagement with poetry as writer is one of the methods by which discerning adult users of language and enthusiastic readers of poetry are created.

The Theory in Design

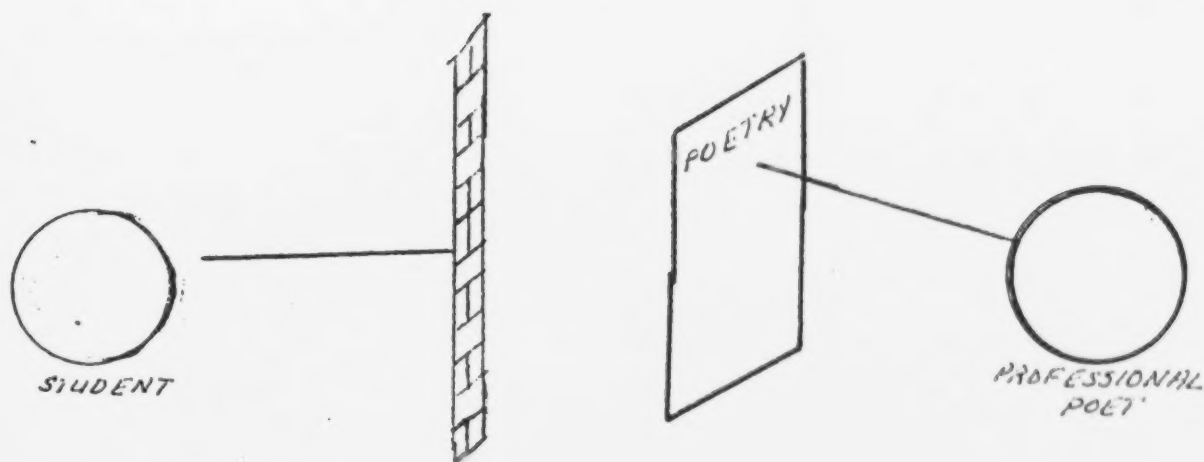


Figure 1. The Student - Text Transaction

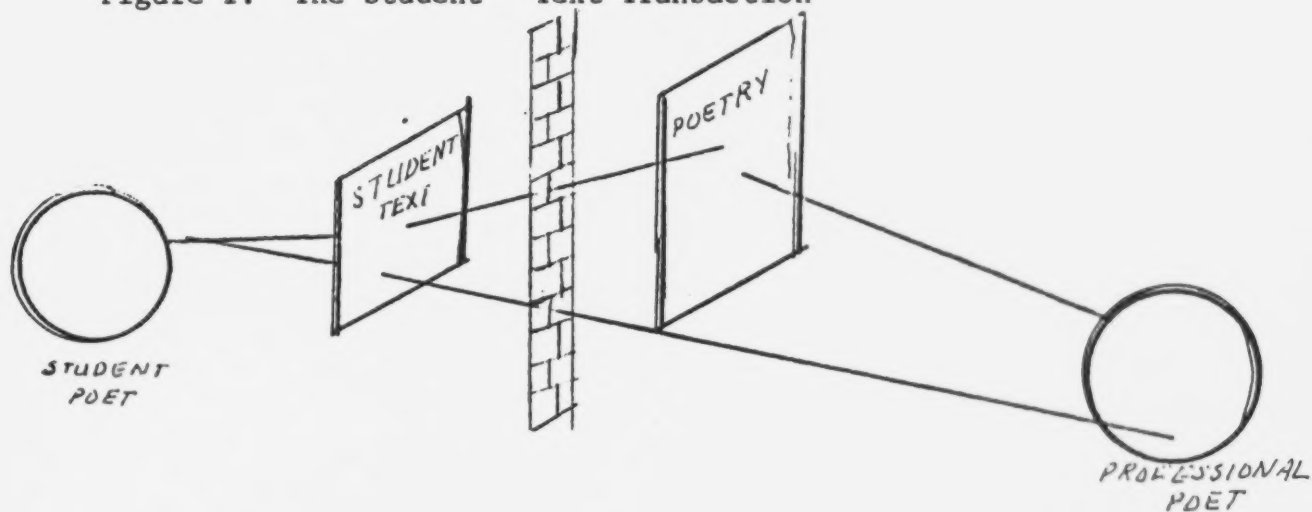


Figure 2. The Student Poet - Text Transaction

The student poet is enabled by his creation of text to penetrate the barrier which separates him from poetic discourse and the poetic vision or imagination. This transcendent capacity is generally inaccessible to the disenchanted or the passive reader of poetry.

Theoretical Foundations

There is no question that activity plays a significant role in learning. Such expressions as "We learn to do by doing" and "Practice makes perfect" have acquired the status of aphorisms, they so generally express the value humans place in practical application. That the act of writing impinges directly upon learning is documented by universal symbols of study: pen and paper.

Yet the interpretation of the exact relationship of writing to learning has undergone a paradigm shift within the last twenty years. The definitive model of writing is not the finished product but the ongoing process, not the written word as final evidence of having thought but the written word as manifestation of continuous thinking. Writing to learn, learning to write by writing, writing as discovery are various affirmations of the new rhetorical stance which equates linguistic activity (writing, reading and speaking) with growth of mind.

This new theory of rhetoric has international and multidisciplinary roots, extending from Russia to England to America and from psychology to philosophy to sociobiology. Seminal in impact have been the studies of Lev Vygotsky which

espouse the essential relationships of hand, language, mind, and society. According to Jerome Bruner, who acknowledges indebtedness to Vygotsky's insights, the Russian

...gives language both a cultural past and a generative present, and assigns it a role as the nurse and tutor of thought....[He] turns the cultural past into the generative present by which we reach toward the future: growth is reaching.

This accolade describes the essence of Vygotsky's perception of gesture and play as the origin of writing; of the private speech of children in activity as the precursor later embedded as thought; of the inherent capacity of children to learn in an environment which prompts and facilitates.

Vygotsky encourages the active use of language for the development of mind. Categorized by him as first- and second- order symbol making, speaking and writing represent not only the articulate synthesis of thought, but also the catalysts which prod the mind to make new models of meaning as it processes information about the world. Language capacitates the mind to encompass broadening concepts as it reflects upon itself (Mind and Society, Chapter 8).

The student who is actively involved in the process of writing poetry, then, expands a capacity to express, to discover, and to create meaning with words. Additionally, when

those experimentations take place in a supportive environment, the student is constantly encouraged toward new achievement. This facilitated striving (in Vygotsky's terms, the zone of proximal development; in Bruner's, the language acquisition support system) accomplishes for the learner that which neither the hand nor the mind could achieve alone. Thus, both theorists emphasize the importance of community, of those who prompt the learner to keep ever moving beyond the edges of his knowing, forever incorporating the new until it becomes his own, enlarged by and enlarging his own cognition.

Social behaviorist George Herbert Mead, in lectures pre-dating both Vygotsky's publications in this country and the work of Bruner, also endorsed the idea of mind arising out of interaction with others. He sees mind as a "social phenomenon....developing within the social process, within the empirical matrix of social interactions" (Mead, 133). To develop mind is to take the attitude of the other toward oneself in a necessary process of reflexiveness and self-consciousness, which Mead defines as "the ability to call out in ourselves a set of definite responses which belong to the others of the group" (Mead, 163).

In the poetry classroom that reinforcing community of others is the small, interactive workshop group. As he learns to "call out" the responses of others, the student/poet learns

to empathize with the classmate whose work he views as a draft in progress. But he also learns empathy for the established poet whose work he encounters in a text called "literature." Meanwhile as the varied group audience responds to him during the process of his writing, the student/poet receives encouragement in the development of a voice which is singular and particularized. In the environment of the peer group, this new poet develops control and confidence, for in functioning as evaluator of the work of peers and in absorbing their critiques, the student/poet not only learns critical reading and thinking but also increases cognizance of strategies of socialization: efficient verbal communication, diplomacy and tact, and appreciation of the individuality of others.

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APPENDIX A

Poetry Workshop Guidelines

1. Class should be divided into small workshop groups of 4-5 students.

I assign groups at beginning of year, allowing students to change AFTER SIX WEEKS if they wish. Trust and respect, which are crucial to the success of the group, are built over time, so everyone must give the group time to coalesce.

2. Only work IN PROGRESS should be brought to workshop, for student must be open to suggestion and willing to consider changes in the manuscript.

If situation allows, each student should prepare manuscript copy for each group member or at least enough for members to share conveniently. Same-day writing and workshop pose copy difficulty; however, some students keep carbon paper in their folders to insert between composition pages when creating in class.

3. There is no group leader. Purpose is to work together out of sense of mutual respect, equally sharing with openness and a diplomatic honesty.

I try to impose as few controls as possible. Student negotiations among themselves are learning experiences for all of us.

4. Poet reads his/her manuscript aloud to group, then listens SILENTLY as all group members respond. No initial defense possible by writer because WORK MUST SPEAK FOR ITSELF.

Group responses are SPECIFIC and addressed always to the whole group, not to individuals and NOT TO THE POET.

First meaning (What is the poet saying?), attempting to reach consensus.

Then method becomes the focus. (What do I find particularly pleasing in the piece? What words, phrases, images work best in carrying the writer's presumed intent? How have title, line breaks, stanza breaks enhanced the meaning? Mood? Tone? Where have

I experienced problems in understanding or response?
Why?)

And finally the suggestions. (What changes would, in my opinion, improve the poet's communication of his thought or feeling? Do I know a poem dealing with a similar idea, emotion, mood which the poet might enjoy reading? Are there grammatical or technical errors in the piece?)

Note that comments are AFFIRMING, CONSTRUCTIVE, RESPECTFULLY HONEST.

5. When group responses are concluded, poet may speak if he/she wishes. Most important, however, is the consideration the poet gives those comments later while revising the manuscript.

APPENDIX B

Formula Poetry

The sense imagery poem breaks down barriers for students who see poetry as rhyme and meter and effete subject matter. They are asked to become poets by following a pattern of sensory recall to make their favorite event "live" for others.

The Formula:

1. Choose a favorite activity. Make that activity the title of your poem.
2. First line: describe how you feel when you engage in this activity.
3. In subsequent lines list two things you see, smell, hear, touch, taste (?.)
4. Final line: clinch, rename, or restate your reaction.

Two poems written in a remedial senior English class of resolute poetry haters:

Deer Hunting

Happy, excited!

I see

the gun
the knife
the ammunition.

I smell

early morning dew
cold winter air.

I hear

the crashing branches
running rodents
leaves crunching underfoot.

I touch

the cold rotting seat
heavy rough bark
warm sticky blood.

The search.

-Wayne Hubler (MHS '83)

Football

Energetic, carefree.
Happy fans,
The marching band,
The furious opponents.
The roar of the crowd,
Quarterbacks calling signals,
The man in the box on the P.A. system.

Hard surfaces:
Helmets,
The ground.

-Michael Watson (MHS '83)

APPENDIX C

Creating Metaphor

On this Creative Friday the mini-lesson consists of analysis of metaphor. We read together selected poems which extend a metaphor the poet has created of disparate objects. From Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle I have chosen "Lost" by Carl Sandburg, "Fueled" by Marcie Hans, "Steam Shovel" by Charles Malam, "The Toaster" by William Jay Smith, and "The Garden Hose" by Beatrice Janosco. Students then choose two unrelated nouns (each pair approved by the class as being appropriately disparate) for which they must create a poem of extended metaphoric relationship.

Living Furniture
(girl, chair)

I am only a chair.
My purpose is to be sat upon.
Do I match your room's decor?
Am I comfortable enough?
That can all be fixed!
Just reupholster me.
If you need a change,
just move me around.
If there's ever a spill or tear on me,
just cover it up.
Nobody'll know.
"What a lovely daughter," they say.
"Where did you ever get her?"

-Maria Manko (MHS '86)

The Journey Down
(car, snowflake)

As I stand here
peering out my window,
I see snowflakes
swishing back and forth
across my window pane
like thousands of small
white cars
on the highway--
a blurred congestion of traffic.

John Heim (MHS '86)

APPENDIX D

Finding Poetry in the Paradox

In the mini-lesson we examine the concept of chiaroscuro, looking at slides of paintings by Caravaggio and the Dutch Masters to see the impact of light and dark in their canvases. Students are then asked to work to create such contrasts verbally, considering their poems as canvases which contrast light and shadow.

The Lights of Darkness

I like the dark
and I like to be alone

I like the evil lace
of bare tree branches
against clouds lit by the moon
and the clear winter stars
whose brilliance is eons old

The cold moon fascinates me
its silken elegance gently glows
with an almost wild tranquility

At home in the dark
alone in the dark
the calmness of night's pale lights
is an obsession.

-Kristin Gallagher (MHS '86)

Black Clouds in a White Sky

Like black clouds on a white sky
We stand out against the plainness.
We contrast, nonconforming.
We dare to merge together,
Yet separate in our uniqueness.

Some see us as part of the sky,
Part of nature,
Part of life.

Some forecast rain...
Some gaze and dream...
Some see oddity...
Some are afraid...

Though we carry no storm.

APPENDIX E

Creating from Photographs

Motivation for writing on this Creative Friday comes from a series of photographs projected onto a screen from the overhead. Students choose the photograph which most interests them, then cluster in groups around the photographs to write whatever springs from their visual experience. The following poem developed from a photograph of what appeared to be a clock repair shop, cluttered with time pieces in various stages of disrepair.

Total Recall

It's all such a blur
when time goes so quickly.
Trying to hold on to the way
you'd like things to stay.
Trace back the seconds;
recall the detail.
From someone will
to someone does
to someone did...
Oh, there must be
a whole in my memory.

-Scott Armstrong (MHS '86)

APPENDIX F

And from the Classics

Senior English at Moorestown includes a unit on Existentialism. One of the readings I include is "The Hollow Men" by T.S. Eliot. The students and I develop what we consider to be Eliot's thesis in this poem: the world is a barren desert filled with empty men and women who are like scarecrows. After several days of in-class analysis of the Eliot poem, students create theses which incorporate their personal perception of the world and its inhabitants. They then write poems exploring their ideas, including as much of the method and form of Eliot as they wish, but working for originality of approach.

Masquerade

(Thesis: The world is a circus and men and women are its clowns.)

Masquerade, painted smiles
of clowns in the circus--
always happy, always cheerful
never fearful.

People.
Native or foreign,
black or white,
sick or healthy,
in one form or another
we "love our brother"
while hatred flows like blood,
a thorough quickness.
Don't let it go on,
to a red dawn
in a world turned into a graveyard
filled with tombstones
over men and women

playing masquerade
with painted smiles
like clowns in the circus--
always happy, always cheerful
never fearful.

-Laura Carpenter (MHS '86)

APPENDIX G

Useful References for the Teacher of Poetry

1. Kenneth Koch. Wishes, Lies, and Dreams. (New York, Harper and Row, 1970)
(Techniques used by author to generate poetry writing by children in P.S. 61 as part of the Poet in the Schools Program in New York City)
2. ----- Rose, Where Did You Get that Red?
(New York, Vintage Books, 1973)
(Contains a very comprehensive anthology of poems, each followed by a related writing assignment)
3. William Higginson with Penny Harter. The Haiku Handbook. (New York, McGraw Hill, 1985).
(Novel, comprehensive approach to the teaching and writing of haiku)
4. Ideas Plus. N.C.T.E., 1984.
5. Writing Magazine
(Geared to high school level. Class subscription rates available for this periodical which includes interviews and reviews of contemporary writers, student writing, useful exercises for the writing class.)
6. Merlyn's Pen
(Published four times a year, this "National Magazine of Student Writing" serves grades 7 through 10. Minimal manuscript revision of accepted work.)
7. Writer Magazine
(Issues devoted to specific writer's market which students will find interesting and usable if they are submitting for publication. Teachers may appreciate listing of writers conferences.)